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ABSTRACT

The effects of reading to children on the development and production of certain morphological structures are examined in a sample of 20 children, two to seven years old, in matched experimental and control groups. Both groups were pre- and posttested with an adapted form of Berko's nonsense-word test. The experimental group was individually read a storybook adapted for the purposes of the study to include four examples of each of the allomorphs tested and questions designed to elicit past tense and plural forms from the child. The story was read to the child twice, each time by a different reader. Results indicated that the experimental group, in contrast with the control group, made significant changes in overall production of plural and past tense inflections. (Author/AA)

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Reading to Children and the Development of Morphological Rule Production

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Summary:

Researchers in interpretation, child language, psycholinguistics, and reading have suggested reading literature to children contributes to language development. This study focuses on testing the effects of reading to children on the development and production of certain morphological structures. Results indicate that the experimental group, as compared to the control group, made significant changes in overall production of plural and past tense inflections.

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Reading To Children And The Development of

Morphological Rule Production

Statement of the Problem

Oral interpreters, child language researchers, psycholinguists and reading specialists have stressed the importance of reading literature aloud to children. From each of these fields have come statements declaring that a child's communicative competence is enhanced through oral reading. Some of the skills reading aloud has been said to advance are vocabulary,[1] phonemic discrimination, naming,[2] listening ability,[3] awareness of unique words and ideas,[4] understanding of the relationship of thoughts and words,[5] the sense of language rhythm,[6] and awareness of pattern.[7] Another advantage of listening to oral reading is reading readiness. As Bacon indicates, children's literature frequently exaggerates elements of sound and structure.[8] Before a child is able to form generalizations about sounds and graphic symbols, he must hear the sounds. Reading aloud enhances the child's ability to use aural cues and to extract meaning from the written word.[9]

The focus of this study is to investigate whether reading aloud to children might contribute to development of language behavior, specifically morphological production. It was hyphothesized that the child's learning and production of inflectional morphemes could be enhanced by oral reading of literature designed to emphasize plural and past tense inflections. Research has been done to determine how

children acquire and develop plural and past tense rules.[10] These rules involve learning the phonological conditions that determine allomorphic variations. The plural and past tense allomorphs studied were:

Plural Morpheme

/ - əz/ allomorph	used after stems ending in strident phonemes (/s z š ž č ǰ/). Examples: lasses, gazes, cashes, rouges, catches, garages
/ - s/ allomorph	used after stems ending in voiceless phonemes (/p t k f θ/). Examples: laps, pats, sacks, laughs, baths
/ - z/ allomorph	used after stems ending in voiced consonants, vowels, and semivowels. (/b d g v ð m n ŋ, vowels, l y r w/). Examples: bibs, bids, begs, gives, bathes, manes, plays, cars, caws, bees, tubas, baas, taboos, solos.
/ - əd/ allomorph	used after stems ending in homorganic phonemes (/t d/). Examples: waited, faded.
/ - t/ allomorph	used after stems ending in voiceless phonemes (/p t f θ s š č/). Examples: lapped, laughed, passed, mashed, matched.
/ - d/ allomorph	used after stems ending in voiced consonants, vowels, and semivowels (/b g v ð z ž ǰ m n ŋ vowels l y r w/). Examples: grabbed, begged, lived, bathed, gazed, paged, names, banged, called, played, barred, cawed, freed, tabooed, soloed.

In 1958 Berko studied the production of plurals, possessives, third person singular verbs, past and progressive verbs, and the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives. She devised a test designed to determine the abilities of children four to seven years old to apply morphological rules to nonsense words consistent with possible English sound combinations. Berko posited that a child's application

of a rule to a nonsense word indicated his internalization of a rule system, rather than memorization of specific inflected forms of familiar words.[11]

This study utilized an adapted form of Berko's nonsense word test to determine children's ability to use plural and past tense inflections. The hypothesis of the study was that oral reading to children and the elicitation of the plural and past tense forms of words used in the story would result in a significant amount of improvement in the application of plural and past tense inflections.

Method

In order to assess the initial status of regular plural and past tense inflections, 29 children ranging in age from two to seven years were pretested. Children scoring 100% as well as those scoring less than 25% were omitted. The remaining twenty subjects were matched on the basis of pre-test scores and were then randomly assigned to the experimental and control groups. One pair of subjects was eliminated due to illness. There were five males and four females in the experimental group and four males and five females in the control group.

A comparison of means for the following variables revealed strong similarities between the two groups even though the only variable specifically used for matching was the pre-test score.

	Control group	Experimental group
Total pre-test scores	59.3 %	59.7 %
Plural pre-test scores	71.3 %	75.0 %

Past tense pre-test scores	47.2 %	44.4 %
Age in months	57.0	53.7
Mother's education (years)	16.3	16.2
Number of children	2.2	2.1

The pre-test adminstered consisted of 24 items, 12 for plural and 12 for past tense inflections. Each allomorph was presented 4 times throughout the test. Nonsense words were utilized since correct production of these words could be considered a generalization of the rules for inflections rather than memorization of particular words in their plural forms.[12] Items were presented in random order using the following basic format:

Plural

This is a wug.
Now there are two of them.
There are two _____ /-z/ .

Past tense

This man knows how to spow.
He did the same thing yesterday.
Yesterday he _____ /-d/ .

Within two weeks after administering the pre-test, children in the experimental group were read to individually on two separate occasions. The book chosen for this purpose, One Monster After Another, by Mercer Mayer, was selected since it contained novel animals and actions and used nonsense words to label them. No child had been previously exposed to the book. Adaptations of the text to serve the purposes of the study were: the addition of nonsense words

to provide four examples of each of the allomorphs, some simplification of the text, and the addition of questions designed to elicit past tense and plural forms from the child. The questions used followed the basic format given below.

Plural

The bot bit the letter.
What kind of animals bite letters? _____

Past tense

The bot fluts.
What did the bot do? He _____

Two female interpretation students served as readers. Each reader presented the book to each child once. Readers provided correct answers to the questions if the child did not respond spontaneously, and then elicited repetitions of the correct responses from the child. Readers were not otherwise instructed as to how to read the story. All readings and tests were conducted in homes.

Following the two readings, both the experimental and control groups were again tested using the original test. Since neither the words nor the form of questioning used in the story were like that of the test, it was assumed that children would not have merely memorized a particular response pattern. Post-tests were administered within one month of the pre-test, a period brief enough so that major improvements as a result of normal development would not have been likely.

Results and Discussion

In order to determine whether the experimental and control groups were significantly different in their pre- to post-test scores, a t-test of paired samples was used. The obtained value was $t_{17} = 4.43$,

$p < .001$ thereby supporting the hypothesis that the two groups were different in their performance from pre- to post-tests. Overall improvement was 18.04 % for the experimental groups while only 4.62 % for the control group. The obtained results lend support to the hypothesis that oral reading can aid in children's use of inflectional morpheme production when emphasis is placed on their use.

Due to the limited sample and the wide age range of children, plus the limited number of readings used, additional research into the relationship between oral reading and morphological development is needed before conclusive statements can be made. However, the research conducted has implications for several areas. First, demonstrating morphological improvement through oral reading lends support to the claims that oral reading experiences may draw attention to certain aspects of language and aid the child in his linguistic development. Results also indicate a more specific advantage of oral reading than has previously been discussed by those who support oral reading to children. Secondly, the results point to the need for materials in children's literature that focus upon specific linguistic structures children may not have mastered at particular age levels. Oral readers are also alerted to the advantages of expanding upon the story, asking questions, and eliciting language from the child that may assist the child's communicative development.

Further investigation should be conducted to examine the potential of teaching other grammatical as well as functional aspects

of language through oral interpretation of literature. Should similar results occur in other language areas, the possibilities for developing the child's language would be unlimited, provided appropriate materials were utilized. The most important implication for education is that teachers and parents may be able to aid children in development of their communicative competence through oral reading that is accompanied by interaction between adult and child.

Footnotes

[1]N. McCaslin, Creative Dramatics in the Classroom, (David McKay: 1974), p. 156.

[2]A. Wilkinson, The Foundations of Language (Oxford University Press: 1971), p. 106.

[3]L. I. Coger and M.A. White, Readers Theater Handbook: A Dramatic Approach to Literature, (Scott Foresman: 1973), p. 126.

[4]H. Bamman, M. Dawson, R. Whitehead, Oral Interpretation of Children's Literature, (Brown: 1971), p. 107).

[5]M.S. Montebello, Children's Literature in the Curriculum. (Brown: 1972), p. 50.

[6]A. Wilkinson, p. 106.

[7]M.H. Arbuthnot and Z. Sutherland, Children and Books, (Scott Foresman: 1972) p. 150.

[8]W. Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston: 1966), p. 323.

[9]E.B. Smith, K. Goodman, R. Meredith, Language and Thinking in the Elementary School, (Holt Rinehart and Winston: 1970), p. 276.

[10]M. Anisfeld, and G. R. Tucker, "English Pluralization rules of Six-year-old Children," in Child Development, 1967, 38, 1201-1207.

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P. Menyuk, Sentences Children Use, (MIT Press: 1969).

[11]J. Berko, "The Child's Learning of English Morphology," in Word, 1958, 14, 150-177.

[12]Berko, pp. 150-177.

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